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SUBJECT: SRI LANKA: UN LAUNCHES 2009 COMMON HUMANITARIAN ACTION PLAN

REF: COLOMBO 0174

¶11. Summary: On February 18, 2009, the United Nations launched its 2009 Common Humanitarian Action Plan (CHAP) for Sri Lanka. The 2009 CHAP requests US\$ 155 million for 103 projects proposed by 42 organizations. Priority activities for immediate requirements are estimated at \$75.7 million. The CHAP focuses on eleven sectors to address needs of over 400,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs) and other conflict affected people in Sri Lanka's North, as well as support for the return of and stabilization process for 20,000 IDPs in the East. In attendance were the Ambassador and USAID Mission Director, heads of mission from other major donor countries, senior officials of aid missions, country directors of several UN agencies, and senior representatives of international NGOs. The CHAP launch included remarks by senior Government of Sri Lanka officials and the resident UN Humanitarian Coordinator, along with a presentation by the Head of OCHA and remarks by the ICRC country director. The launch concluded with questions and answers and a short Government video portraying the plight of civilians trapped in fighting and their treatment after they crossed over Government battles lines.
End Summary

Collaborative Process between UN and GSL

¶12. After the UN Humanitarian Coordinator's introductory remarks, Minister of Disaster Management and Human Rights Mahinda Samarasinghe spoke on behalf of the Government of Sri Lanka. He outlined the steps leading to development of the CHAP document, commenting on the collaborative nature of the process between the UN and the Government. He described the Government as being "happy with the document," stating that "now we have a consensus position." Anticipating the normal, mid-year review of the CHAP (April - June timeframe) as the time to make adjustments in programs and resource levels, the Minister emphasized two important points: 1) activities implemented under the CHAP must be consistent with the Government's National Economic Development Plan, and 2) the Government, in 2009, will expect improvements in the monitoring of partners' performance under the CHAP, with a focus on outputs.

CHAP Overview

¶13. The UN Humanitarian Coordinator gave an overview of the 2009 CHAP. It targets 433,000 beneficiaries, including 310,000 IDPs in the North and 4,000 in the East, 19,000 returnees (in the East), and

100,000 vulnerable people affected by the conflict, including people in Jaffna. He described the conditions of the civilians currently trapped in the Vanni and cited the government's estimate of 150,000 trapped civilians, versus the UN estimate of 230,000 persons). Using the sector (cluster) approach, the UN and its partners are developing sector plans for the transit sites (now numbering 17 in the District of Vavuniya) being set up for the Vanni IDPs after they are screened and then transported by the army to these temporary facilities. The Humanitarian Coordinator emphasized three priorities of the CHAP: 1) relief assistance to IDPs and vulnerable populations; 2) protection for civilians affected by the fighting, including their screening once they cross over to the army, and the application of international standards, such as civilian management and freedom of movement, for their temporary stay in transit sites; and 3) early recovery that will support voluntary returns of the remaining IDPs in the East, and of those in the North, in the shortest possible timeframe.

¶4. The identification of projects was based on the UN cluster system, led by the UN in partnership with NGOs and in collaboration with the Government's line ministries. The Head of the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) summarized the focus and funding requirements of each of the eleven clusters (sectors) under the CHAP: shelter/non food relief items/camp management, water and sanitation, food, nutrition, health, education, agriculture and food security, economic recovery and infrastructure, protection, coordination, and support services. She stated that, of the total cost (\$155 million) of the CHAP, \$75.7 million was needed for priority activities. For example, of the estimated \$59 million requested for the food sector, she identified \$27 million as urgent for the first six months, primarily for the procurement of rice.

Questions from the Audience

¶5. At the end of the presentation, there was a question and answer session. The US Ambassador asked about plans for resettling IDPs in the North, commenting on recent, encouraging statements by the Government that the goal would be for 80 percent of the Vanni IDPs to be resettled by the end of 2009. The Ambassador emphasized the importance of applying international humanitarian standards, lauding the improvement of access by humanitarian workers in the Vavuniya sites, but expressed concern about the lack of international monitoring of the screening of IDPs in Kilinochchi and Omanthai once they leave LTTE-controlled territory.

Government's Responses

¶6. Special Advisor to the President Basil Rajapaksa fielded these and other questions. He described the treatment of civilians after they cross Army lines. After a security screening, they are given a medical check-up and basic supplies (high energy biscuits, water, snacks). Within a day or two, buses transport them to transit sites in Vavuniya, where they are provided basic services (shelter, food, water, toilets, electricity). While acknowledging the contribution of UN and NGO partners, Rajapaksa emphasized that it is the Government of Sri Lanka that is responsible for its citizens and is meeting many of their basic needs.

¶7. He described the four stages of Government plans for IDPs in the North. After their basic needs were met, he said the Government's plan was to accommodate people in "transitional places," an idea that emerged following the President of Sri Lanka's visit to model villages constructed in China for earthquake victims. He described these transitional places as having a range of facilities, including schools, health facilities, banks, post offices, cooperative stores, and counseling centers. (Note These transitional places appear to cross the line from temporary facilities to a longer-term arrangement, similar to the "welfare villages" that the Government has talked about over the past several months.)

¶8. The final stage for IDPs will be resettlement to their places of origin. The special advisor emphasized the importance of planning, with an emphasis on infrastructure (road construction, electricity, irrigation schemes, health centers), law and order (six police stations have recently been built, including one for Kilinochchi),

and de-mining (U.S.-trained Sri Lankan military de-miners have moved from the East to undertake humanitarian de-mining in Mannar and Vavuniya Districts). He stated that the priority areas for resettlement include Mannar and Vavuniya Districts (all IDPs to return in time for rice planting in April), and other areas that had high population densities and where few mines had been laid. He referred to the rapid resettlement of IDPs in the East, saying that the Government expected 80 percent of the Vanni IDPs to be resettled in the North by the end of 2009.

Three-pronged Approach to Assist Civilians

¶ 9. Rajapaksa stated that 90 percent of the civilians currently trapped in the Vanni were now in the Government-established safe zones. In contrast to Government predictions in January that the war would be finished within a matter of days, Rajapaksa took a more measured position in his remarks to the CHAP audience. He said the Government was doing its best to get civilians out, but that more time would be needed, citing a three-pronged approach: 1) cessation of the use of heavy weapons and no indirect firing into the safety zone, even if the LTTE positions were among civilians; 2) in collaboration with ICRC, transport of sick and injured to Trincomalee, where the Government would take over sole responsibility for attending to its citizens; and 3) in collaboration with the World Food Program, daily shipments of food (80 - 100 MTs) by sea to the Vanni. He also stated that the Ministry of Health will provide the ICRC with medicines for the next sea shuttle between Trincomalee and the Vanni. Rajapaksa assured attendees that screening of IDPs was done according to international standards, once they crossed army lines. He also stated that the Government was setting up hotlines to trace family members and issuing identity cards to facilitate people's movement once they had been registered. When pressed, he said that the ICRC would be allowed to monitor the screening of IDPs, which takes place at Kilinochchi and Omanthai.

Comment

¶ 10. In contrast to previous years, questions at the 2009 CHAP launch focused on ongoing humanitarian concerns, rather than resource levels and program strategy. Of greatest interest were the need for a resettlement strategy that will encourage voluntary returns in a short, reasonable timeframe; and humanitarian access to IDPs, both during the initial screening when civilians cross over to the Government side and in the transit sites being set up in Vavuniya and Mannar. In general, Special Advisor Rajapaksa's comments were encouraging and consistent with expectations of the humanitarian community. However, his description of the planned "transitional villages" implies that the GSL still plans longer than transitional stays for a significant percentage of the people coming out of the North.

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